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Advocacy: The experience of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education

Alan Tuckett

"Within the adult education culture adults educate other adults by beating drums for attention, singing folk songs and shouting messages over loudspeakers; by putting posters on walls, and organising exhibits; by organising political and religious functions on street corners or in city parks; and by spreading the message over radio and television."

Harbans Bhola

In a perfectly ordered world, the case for adult learning would be as well understood as the case for educating children. Not only politicians, planners and providers, but also learners and potential learners would clearly see the benefits to adults and to the communities in which they live from participation in adult learning. Providers would recognise the need for flexibility in programming, to take account of the other pressures that affect adults' lives. They would be skilled in drawing out adult learners' previous experience. All courses would be structured in ways to accommodate the diversity of learning strategies adults employ. Adults from all sections of the community would participate in equal measure. Buildings would be functional and beautiful. The quality of provision would be universally high, and there would be enough money for the provision to be affordable to everybody.

We do not yet live in such a society, in Britain, at least. Until we do, there will be a need to remind politicians, planners and learners themselves that things can be done better, and that adult learning has a key role to play in securing economic prosperity and social cohesion, as Jacques Delors recognised (CEU, 1994). There will also be a need to highlight the gap between the aspirations of policy makers and the reality of the choices really available to learners. There will be a need, too, to promote and disseminate good practice in work with adults.

If lifelong learning is to be meaningfully available to all, it will include strategies to secure informed active citizens, skilled in democratic participation, and in debating and negotiating change. It will recognise the different circumstances and needs of different groups, if access is to be available to marginalized groups. To that end, voluntary organisations have a key role to play, in developing alternative models for the delivery of

services, but also in imagining how things might be done differently and better. This is, in essence, advocacy work..

This paper explores how that case is made in England and Wales by a national non-governmental organisation, with a wide membership base, and argues that advocacy is central to any programme of adult, or social, education.

The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) was created as the British Institute of Adult Education in 1921. Its overall object is 'the promotion of the study and the general advancement of adult continuing education', and its members' priorities are to secure more and different adult learners. NIACE is a charity, a company limited by guarantee and a broad membership. Its members include universities, colleges of further education, local authority adult education providers; the Workers Educational Association, Ford Motor Company, the Trades Union Congress, the National Federation of Women's Institutes, the National Trust, the BBC and other television companies, the University for Industry, the Ministry of Defence, arts bodies, libraries, museums and many local agencies. It receives grants covering ten percent of its budget from central and local government; the balance it secures through a wide range of consultancy, research and development work, through publications, conferences, promotional activities and through fundraising from charitable and business sources.

NIACE enjoys a close and effective relationship with Government as a critical friend. NIACE believes that there are similarities, but key differences between the role of a non-government organisation (NGO) and that of a political party. Political parties in a democracy offer different portfolios of measures, which taken together offer voters a view on how the general interest can be secured. NGOs, on the other hand, represent specific interests. Their task is to try to ensure that these interests are not forgotten when the general interest is being settled. Both need flair, imagination, and solid evidence for their arguments to capture attention and to be persuasive. But whilst surprise is an important weapon in the armoury of the politician, NIACE believes it has little or no place in the work of the NGO. NIACE is concerned to secure change to improve affairs for adult learners over the long run, and will seldom gain by bouncing politicians or civil servants into making decisions against their judgement.

The Institute identifies eight core functions in its work, of which advocacy is the first and most important. They are:

- representing the interests of adult learners and the bodies that serve them;
- developing co-operative relations with organisations, institutions and individuals promoting adult continuing education in the UK and other countries;

- conducting enquiries and research;
- collecting and disseminating information;
- convening conferences, seminars or meetings;
- publishing and distributing publications;
- undertaking special projects, and administering special agencies set up by the Board of NIACE;
- renting, leasing, buying or selling property to facilitate its work or that of agencies for which it is responsible.

Apart, possibly from the last of these tasks, all its other functions feed its ability to represent the interests of adult learners.

Early in the Institute's life its Secretary, W.E. Williams noticed that there were no works of art on public display in Northampton, a large town in the south Midlands. He reasoned that it was hard for people to have access to a full life as citizens, if they had no opportunity to appreciate at first hand the aesthetic inheritance, and current cultural practice of the country they lived in. With support from a charitable foundation, the British Institute, as it then was, organised in the mid 1930s a programme of touring exhibitions, Art for the People, to demonstrate the demand for access to art. At the same time Williams and others began the task of persuading Government that this was an issue of public policy. From the modest demonstration projects developed by the non-government organisation, a Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was established, which became the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1945, with Williams as its first Secretary General. Identifying need, and practical measures to meet need are central to effective advocacy work. But so, too, is the lobbying and public debate necessary to make it possible for policy makers to accept that there is a problem, and that the proposed solutions will work. (Williams, 1971)

Williams was a significant innovative force, and developed the case for current affairs programmes for military personnel, conscripted into the armed forces during the 1939-45 war – the Army Bureau of Current Affairs. Materials were prepared and circulated to all units to enable soldiers, sailors and airmen and women to discuss the social and political issues of the day in weekly adult education courses. Some commentators attribute the armed forces' enthusiastic endorsement of the welfare state in the 1945 election to the effectiveness of this programme. Both these initiatives illustrate successful advocacy. But both were the product of top downwards policy development – with the advocacy directed successfully to securing centrally directed change.

However, adult learning differs from initial education in being shaped as much by bottom-up innovation as by government fiat. The adult literacy campaign of the 1970s

began in voluntary organisations, many of them designed to ameliorate inner city poverty through personal social service, rather than education. The model adopted, which centred on private one to one tuition with volunteer tutors was as a result, perhaps unsurprisingly, modelled on social work rather than class based teaching. The agencies combined together to create a Right To Read campaign, which demanded resources and a national commitment to eradicating illiteracy. (Tuckett,2001)

The National Institute was pressed by its members to support the campaign, and the BBC decided to mount a high profile prime time television series, *On The Move* which would be likely to stimulate large numbers of adults with literacy problems to seek help. Eventually, the government responded with short term funding for a national agency to be established in the National Institute. Twenty five years later, the agency, now the Basic Skills Agency has become independent, and its budgets are substantial. The Right to Read campaigners had estimated that one million adults had literacy problems. In 1999 a Government report on basic skills argued that seven million adults in the UK have basic skills needs, and created the conditions for serious cross-Government priority and funding to be given to basic education for adults. (Moser,1999)

Twenty five years is a long time to wait for a problem to be addressed in a sustained and systematic way. But the advocacy work of the 1970s literacy campaign bore fruit before the Moser report. Until the 1970s basic education programmes were patronising in the extreme, infanticising participants. The practitioners shaping the adult literacy campaign rejected this approach. As Jane Mace put it, there was a habit of blaming the victims of failed social policy. First we fail to teach people to read, then we blame the learner for lacking motivation, application or intelligence. The literacy campaign, like the worker writers' movement of the same years focused on what new readers had to say as writers. The magazine *Write First Time* captured a flowering of student voices, as a new strand of working class writing emerged from small presses. This was cultural production, and it made a powerful case for re-ordering priorities in education policy, for learners to be guaranteed a second chance. The campaign did much to revitalise the National Institute, too, linking it to initiatives on behalf of the excluded and marginalized. Through the 1980s this strand of work saw the emergence of programmes of work designed to secure equal opportunities for women, for black and other minority ethnic communities, and to support unemployed adults.

Frequently, then, initiatives to change policy emerge from a concern to address issues of injustice. This was recognised by the last Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England, David Blunkett. He was a passionate believer in the role of adult education as an agent of social change, and that ordinary working class people could

combine together to learn their way out of their difficulties. In his Preface to the 1998 Green Paper, *The Learning Age*, he argued:

"We are fortunate in this country to have a great tradition of learning. We have inherited the legacy of the great self-help movements of the Victorian industrial communities. Men and women, frequently living in desperate poverty, were determined to improve themselves and their families. They did so through the creation of libraries, study at workers' institutes, through the pioneering efforts of the early trade unions, at evening classes, through public lectures and by correspondence courses. Learning enriched their lives and they, in turn, enriched the whole of society." (DfES,1998)

The same understanding shaped the thinking of Japan's Lifelong Learning Council, which argued in 1992:

It is desirable that people grapple with lifelong learning, not only for self improvement, or vocational advancement for themselves, but also to increase social contribution or teaching others (...) Volunteer activities are not only related closely to lifelong learning but also to social problems in society. Therefore such activities are important for the development of a rich and active society and the construction of a lifelong learning society. (Lifelong Learning Council, Japan, 1992 cited in Belanger and Federighi, 2000)

There is, though, nothing that guarantees that voluntary organisations are innovative, and creative. The literacy campaign, and the subsequent equal opportunities programmes illustrate that bodies like NIACE, which seek to speak on behalf of learners need constantly to explore how effectively they themselves are listening to the full range of constituencies for which they speak. They need, too, to be open to new energies, and to use their skills to underpin others' initiatives.

All this experience was vital when, at the beginning of the 1990s the Conservative government of the day proposed to end all public support for the kind of adult education that had no immediate use value for the labour market, and which did not lead to qualifications. These proposals themselves emerged from an effective piece of advocacy work from a conservative think tank. In *Away with LEAs* (Lawlor 1990) Sheila Lawlor argued that money spent on adult education for personal fulfilment was money in effect stolen from schools. She argued that there should only be public subsidy for such work in areas of extreme disadvantage, and then that the money should come from social service budgets. Broadly, her arguments were accepted by the Government in its White Paper, *Learning for the Twenty First Century* (DES/EDG, 1991). Its concern was that with increasing pressures from globalisation, and with a poor record, in comparison with its international competitors in securing a qualified and skilled work force, limited public

spending needed to be concentrated on those areas which would have an immediate impact on the UK's economic competitiveness. In the early Parliamentary debates on the paper, it was argued that there was no good case to be made for funding flower arranging from the public purse.

NIACE acted swiftly to contest these arguments. Its first act was to publish widely a summary of the Government's proposals, and its critique of them. This was in essence, that whilst everyone agreed that priority should be given to learning to support the economy, adult education played a number of other equally important roles – in prolonging active citizenship for older adults; offering a safe environment for people recovering from mental illness to rebuild relationships; securing support for parents through family learning; building confidence among learners taking their first steps back to education; and fostering that complex web of civil society activities that characterise pluralist democracies.

NIACE circulated its summary and critique to politicians, the press and to providers large and small. Second, it secured serious allies, in the shape of the local government associations and the National Federation of Women's Institutes – a federation of women's organisations in rural Britain offering a broad range of activities including social education. A national petition secured half a million signatures in just over two weeks. The 9,000 local branches of the NFWI encouraged individual members to write to politicians, and MPs received a postbag as large as that engendered by the deeply unpopular poll tax. Third, NIACE found articulate learners willing and able to talk to the press about their experiences. In response to the familiar denigration of flower arranging, the Institute found a florist in Brixton – the site of civil disturbances in the 1980s, and the heart of black Britain – who had previously worked as a merchant banker. He had prepared for his change of career by taking flower arranging classes at his local south London adult education institute; he had employed almost half the other participants as workers in his impressive shop, and sent new workers to the classes as their industrial training. He spoke to Donald MacLeod of *The Independent* newspaper, who carried the story as a major feature. Within days, politicians were saying, 'Of course we know flower arranging can lead on to careers in floristry...'

The key role NIACE played in the campaign was to keep everyone actively informed of developments, and to find good illustrations of the public policy case. The raised political profile of the campaign led to the re-establishment of an All Party Parliamentary Committee for Adult Education with NIACE as its secretariat. Within six weeks, the Government changed its proposals, and agreed that uncertificated adult education should continue to be funded as part of the portfolio of educational services provided by local education authorities. The funding, however, was modest and it has taken until 2001 to

end the artificial divide between certificated and uncertificated adult education created by the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. (Tuckett, 1996)

Despite this, the campaign had a marked effect on NIACE's relationship with Government, and with its own constituencies. The decision to contest the Government's proposals head on was not difficult to take. The proposals took no account of the complexity of adults' learning journeys in NIACE's view, and risked further excluding marginalized groups. However, the Minister of State for Education, Tim Eggar, was reported as saying, 'I have no objection to what NIACE is doing, but why should we pay for it, suggesting that NIACE's grant aid was at risk. By contrast, NIACE's member organisations expressed the strongest support for the Institute's work. As the resulting legislation passed through Parliament, the Institute briefed politicians of all parties on the issues under consideration, and developed an effective review process with central government officials, to minimise the areas of conflict, and to ensure that within the limits of government policy, provision might best benefit adult learners.

This process required some subtlety. It was important to have a dialogue with the Government that sought the most effective means of supporting adult learners within the framework of policy, whilst at the same time making clear which areas of policy NIACE disagreed with. NIACE determined always to tell Government how it proposed to pursue policy disagreements. That helped in keeping a dialogue open, and to secure less public policy shifts, as did the warm support for its work shown by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Adult Education. Keeping the field up to date was important, too. They were convinced that for many adults, there needed to be modest local community education as a first step back to learning. That argument was accepted by Eggar's successor as Minister, Tim Boswell, who argued, 'It is quite unusual for adults who have not had the best experience with the formal educational process to move straight into a qualification-bearing course. I entirely accept the argument that adults may be drawn back into learning by joining, for instance, a non-vocational course which may instil the confidence needed to try to update their skills.' (Boswell, 1993)

Whilst the legislative battle continued, NIACE planned for the introduction of the first Adult Learners' Week in 1992. The Week was timed to follow straight on from the completion of the debates on the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. NIACE was concerned to raise the profile of adult learners in all their complexity, to celebrate existing learners, and to motivate others to participate. All the major terrestrial television companies agreed to put on programming celebrating adult learning; a free telephone helpline service was established for potential students; national and regional awards for outstanding adult learners were introduced. There was a Parliamentary reception, national policy conferences and thousand of local activities. Celebrities participated free

of charge. More than a thousand press articles appeared – all promoting the story, that it is never too late to learn. 55,000 people called the helpline, more than half of them long-term unemployed, and one in three of the people who called took up courses within three months. NIACE published new research on participation, which received widespread attention. From there Adult Learners' Week has become an integral part of the annual educational calendar.

For NIACE's advocacy work, it highlighted a number of important lessons. The first was that parties are more effective as sites of struggle than the barricades. By introducing policy makers to learners whose lives had been transformed by adult learning, the old stereotypes about flower arranging were overcome. No one in Parliament now talks in the old simplicities. The stories of individual learners, and groups who have made the effort to change their lives, are now the substance of legislators' discussions. People love 'posh frock' days, excuses to take what is often a rather private activity into a public celebration.

The second lesson was that on such occasions, people who have been locked in disagreement will come together and explore how best they may work together in the future. Oddly, where a voluntary organisation has campaigned robustly, but continued to work with officials and politicians in an open way, levels of trust can be enhanced rather than diminished.

The third, key lesson, was that effective partnerships achieve far more than isolated activity. From the beginning of Adult Learners' Week, NIACE undertook only to organise a number of central events. It encouraged others to adapt the week on their own terms, to their own purposes. Where conflicts emerged, the Institute was quick to apologise. NIACE was clear that the week was for learners, not the NGO. This reinforced the trust enjoyed by the Institute.

The fourth lesson, developed over the last decade, was that the Week provided an annual focus for policy development affecting adult learners, and a useful time to secure initiatives that crossed different social policy streams – involving health and education together; looking at the role of adult learning in local economic regeneration, and the links between learning and the cultural industries. It also provided an occasion to publish significant pieces of research. Each year now, NIACE commissions a national participation survey to highlight the extent to which the aspirations to create a learning society are borne out in the experiences of the population. These findings show a persisting divide between the learning rich and learning poor. In the years after 1992 they also showed the impact of legislative change on the participation rate of older people – as uncertificated provision declined, there was a forty percent drop in pensioners'

participation. NIACE's quantitative research is backed by qualitative studies that highlight the barriers to participation and achievement, and illustrations of effective strategies for overcoming the barriers. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative research highlight agendas for future policy development work. At the same time, the national policy conferences offer opportunities to spotlight different aspects of the field – from family learning to learning in the workplace; from the role of libraries and museums, to grass roots community organisations' initiatives.

The last lesson has shaped the work of the Institute in the decade since 1992. It is that learners are their own best advocates, and that adult learning organisations need consciously to build capacity for learners to be active, participative citizens, and the subjects and shapers of their own learning experience. For adults with learning difficulties the work has focused on supporting learners to identify, publish and disseminate a charter of learning rights to support the fullest possible independent active citizenship. The charter was the product of project work shaped by learners with learning difficulties, supported by NIACE's specialist staff, Jeannie Sutcliffe and Yola Jacobsen. It contains ten proposals, each with an explanatory phrase – and practice materials for professionals wanting to learn to listen to adults with learning difficulties more effectively. The charter, *'Our Right to Learn'*, calls for:

- **The right to speak up** – “We are adults with a voice; we want to be heard”
- **The right to choose to go to classes** – “We should have a say in what we learn”
- **The right to have support** – “Someone you can rely on to help”
- **The right to have a chance to make friends** – “To mix with the crowd a little more and make new friends”
- **The right to have fun learning** – “The more you enjoy it, the more you learn”
- **The right to good access** – “Lifts, ramps, more room for wheelchairs”
- **The right not to be bullied** – “Cut out bullying –Everybody equal”
- **The right to be treated as adults with respect** – “Talk to us like adults”
- **The right to have clear information that we can understand** – “The information needs to be easy to understand – it is too complicated”
- **The right to have good teaching** – “You need a good teacher to help you learn”
- **The right to be able to do a course to get a job** – “To give us the skills to maybe get a job”
- **The right to learn in a nice place** – “A place where you feel comfortable.”(Jacobsen,2000)

It makes for powerful reading – not only making clear what kind of learning would support adults with learning difficulties in using learning in pursuit of fully realised

independent lives, but also telling quietly how large a gap there is between the ideal and what is offered in too many places. Far too much provision offers a narrow curriculum, unimaginative teaching and poor physical facilities. Set against that one learner's soaring ambition to learn about "Jesus and history, and thunder and lightning". (Sutcliffe, 1990).

Learners have played a key role in developing the case for improved learning opportunities for older people, and in encouraging older adults to extend the range of their curiosities. Memorably, as part of Adult Learners' Week, a group of pensioners organised Growing Old Disgracefully – a programme of events where older adults in Merseyside in the North West of England did things they had never given themselves permission to do when younger. A group of women toured the city centre of Liverpool singing opera from an open topped double decker bus. Other learners practised water-skiing on the River Mersey. More conventionally, the retired people who organised the University of the Third Age movement have contributed actively to NIACE's Older and Bolder programme which contests ageism in adult education policy and practice. (Carlton and Soulsby, 1998) NIACE itself helped by organising an initiative to find the oldest learner in Britain. Fred Moore, now 108 and the oldest living man in the UK regularly takes art classes in New Milton, Hampshire. These initiatives attract widespread and sympathetic media coverage, and contribute to changing the public attitude to learning and age.

It is just as important, though to change attitudes among providers. Course structures, timing, and learning support arrangements are, all too often, designed with the needs of full-time adolescent learners in mind. It is easy for providers to forget the other pressures on adult learners' lives – their need to squeeze learning in to the spaces left over from other obligations. Once again, this message is most impressively conveyed through learners' descriptions of their own experiences, as in this piece where an Open University student makes clear that families are not always wholehearted in their support for adult learning:

"Continue to work on essay from 10.00 until 1.00. I commented on the hours I have worked to my daughter who has been doing her GCSEs. She feels what I'm doing is a waste of time and perhaps she is right but I do enjoy learning. To continue my studying I find I will need to organize my days very carefully so as not to disturb the family's routine.

I have been rather taken up with studying and doing my essay and the house is in a mess and my husband wasn't very pleased this morning when there was no clean shirt. I was also a bit late with the tea tonight and we ended up with tuna and salad.

Essay still in progress and by the time I have finished it would have taken me 24 hours collecting facts, organizing them into a reasonable essay and then typing it up.

Tutorial tomorrow which I'm looking forward to as it helps to learn that everyone is having problems and it's not just me." (Coare and Thomson,ed.1996,p.156)

This piece appeared in *Through the Joy of Learning*, the outcome of a project initiated by NIACE in the mid-1990s to capture the Diary of A Thousand Learners. Its core message is that given the opportunity, and support adults will show tremendous flair, resilience and creativity through their learning. That, too, has been the central lesson of the Adult Learners' Week awards. In 1998 NIACE decided to build on the riches of this experience in convening a National Forum of Adult Learners to offer politicians and practitioners advice.

Through the 1990s there has been a steady re-rating of the importance of lifelong learning to public policy. In the UK that was accelerated with the election in 1997 of a Government which declared itself to be determined to create a learning society. The Minister for Further and Higher Education launched the first National Forum meeting, and debated learners' proposals openly and seriously with learners, and the Government made listening to learners a responsibility built in to its 2000 legislation for the Learning and Skills era. Subsequent meetings of the Forum, in which their attention was turned to the ways institutions might adapt their practices were interestingly more contentious. Providers found it harder to hear the criticisms of their practice. The constant challenge is to avoid the views of existing and potential learners only being heard to reinforce the policy priorities of providers.

Creating a learner-centred system may be the declared aim of Government policy, but it is more easily said than done. Highlighting the gap between aspiration and reality has become the key advocacy task of NIACE, at a time when the Government's broad policy goals are sympathetic to adult learners. The difficulty does not lie in the broad aspiration. Geoff Mulgan, head of one of the Prime Minister's policy advice teams captures the broad goal well:

"In a world where governments no longer exercise much sovereignty either over their defences or over their economies, the best service they can perform for their citizens is to help them to be stronger, more responsible, more capable of making decisions and understanding the worlds in which they live. Narrowly this

means providing them with skills to make them employable; the habits of being disciplined and flexible, creative and adaptive... More broadly it means helping them to look after themselves and to care for others, helping with life skills and emotional rather than just the analytical intelligence that older educational systems valued so highly." (Mulgan, 1997)

David Blunkett, in the same piece cited above, made perhaps the fullest commitment to an inclusive definition of the policy goals of lifelong learning, when he argued:

"As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation." (DfEE, 1998).

Turning these goals into practice on the ground remains a challenge, though. The Treasury, like finance ministries in most parts of the world, prefers expenditure which has a measurable and early rate of return. The softer measures of community based learning are harder to defend than qualifications which have an explicit relationship with labour market needs. People who have worked in a vocationally led education and training system all their lives know little of what works best in community learning, and many practitioners have lost the skills of effective outreach work. As Blunkett also argued, turning round an oil tanker takes time, but first you need to know where you are trying to go. NIACE's task is to try to ensure that the tanker is aimed in the right direction.

The Institute has worked closely with Government in the management of innovative projects to strengthen capacity in community based learning, through the joint management of the Adult and Community Learning Fund, which has supported local community based initiatives to engage learners in shaping new learning opportunities for adults, and has disseminated its findings widely. NIACE has supported training initiatives for practitioners and decision makers. It services a number of practitioner networks to strengthen communication between practice and policy. And of course its research and good practice work – through seminars, conferences, staff development programmes and publication are all aimed at the same goals.

Currently, the Institute's prime national advocacy focus is on ensuring that the newly created Learning and Skills Council is adult friendly. This body, created as a result of legislation in 2000, began work this year to plan and fund all further education, training for work, and community education below the level of universities in England. It is an enormous task, and includes the merging of very different institutional cultures. On its

first day it published, for consultation, a draft corporate plan, which in NIACE's view narrowed the focus it had been given in its remit letter in an unhelpful way – notably through proposing targets which omitted a general adult participation target. NIACE had fought for a decade to secure an adult participation target as the best measure of success in reaching excluded groups, and succeeded in securing a national target in 1998. It would, the Institute's members felt, be an unhelpful move if the Council were to seem to abandon widening participation as a core goal, not least because so many of its staff were more experienced in narrower work-focused learning provision. Early briefings, a short public debate, private briefings and intense lobbying secured the commitment to include a general target from 2002.

At the same time as the Institute was making the case for a target, it was working hard to ensure that the Council was successful in the transition work needed to bring different funding and administration systems affecting adults together. NIACE seconded one of its deputy directors to work on funding and structures for community based adult learning, and other staff to work on basic education. Its members contributed to the plethora of advisory committees established to ensure that work on quality and delivery took into account the full range of learners' interests. The Institute also negotiated a servicing role, to supply the Council with professional support and advice. A key element of those negotiations was creating a clear understanding of the boundaries between NIACE's obligations as a contractor working on the Council's behalf, and its responsibility to its members to be an advocate on behalf of its members. In the end the tension between these roles is managed through openness and trust.

Adults are not tidy learners. Their interests and concerns spill over different social policy streams. In the area of learning and health, the evidence is mounting that continuing learning prolongs active citizenship, and delays morbidity. It makes good sense for local doctors to prescribe learning rather than pills in a number of cases. NIACE has a Prescriptions for Learning project to highlight the benefits of locating learning advisers in doctors' surgeries. Affecting policy across Government departments is, however, difficult, and it requires considerable patience. If benefits to health can be secured by modest increases in education spending, three policy departments need to be convinced – the health, education and finance ministries, not only that such work is a priority, and each department will have different goals, but also that measures can be put in place to evaluate the impact of policy. Still, patience, a willingness to settle for less in the short term, combined with long term intransigence are the characteristics of a committed voluntary agency. Much policy work involves early defeats, before the ideas are accepted as common sense by enough people to create the climate for change – as environmental activists can testify.

The main attention in this paper has been on national policy change in England. However, policy affecting adult learning is shaped at local, regional national and supra-national level, too. The devolved national administrations mean that NIACE needs to maintain a distinct advocacy role in Wales, through its Welsh arm, NIACE Dysgu Cymru. The growth of regional government involves the Institute's regional staff in supporting regionally distinct responses to different policy initiatives. The Institute contributes, too, to the work of the European Association for the Education of Adults to affect policy at a European level, and to the work of the International Council for Adult Education globally.

Advocacy for marginalized groups has also been central to NIACE's work. The Institute's quantitative studies show that working class adults, older people, people with disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, part-time workers, travellers, people without qualifications, those who left school early, and rural communities are all under-represented in post school education and training. Making the case for their needs, through research on barriers to participation and achievement, and illustrative materials on what works to overcome obstacles for particular groups is a major feature of the Institute's research work. Many of the barriers are of course common to several or all marginalized groups, but there are particular challenges facing each as well. In particular, the Institute's recent work focuses on how best adult learning can support economic and social regeneration in the very poorest communities, where there is little work and little social capital. It is challenging work; it needs patience of course, but can be immensely rewarding.

There are inevitably as many failures as successes in such work. Much of it involves private negotiation over the mechanisms for delivering educational services, and these remain invisible to learners. Indeed, some of the most successful advocacy work results in an unhelpful proposed change being dropped. By contrast, public advocacy makes a real contribution to cultural change. Celebration of the richness and diversity of adult learning is important in giving people confidence to see learning as an option in their own lives. It gives added meaning to the often private struggles learners survive in the course of their studies, and it provides the occasion for a good deal of fun.

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